**Curbing online cheating in exams**

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In response to the coronavirus pandemic, universities across the globe opted for remote learning, and their rapid shift to conducting online classes and exams was commendable. But to what extent have Pakistani universities and autonomous bodies for external examinations prepared to adapt to virtual learning and resolve unattended concerns of the examiners and students that have further jeopardised the broken education system of Pakistan? Perhaps a student might cheat during an online exam; would this amount to academic dishonesty and moral corruption? Suspecting a student of cheating has always been easier than arguing of the hand academicians have in promoting cheating, either as a disinterested professor—who failed to pass on his knowledge—or as the invigilator, who was only present for the sake of his fixed hourly compensation. Is this also not moral corruption?

With more online exams during the pandemic, academicians are concerned about the surge in academic dishonesty. Of course, this is not the first time that cheating in exams has made headlines and been a point of concern for everyone. In the past, during normalcy, one of Sindh’s examination centres made it to the news for massive cheating during in-person exams, which was facilitated by none other than the invigilators, who were bribed.

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No sense of responsibility exercised by the government, as well as by the institutes to formulate a robust policy regarding conducting smooth, yet cheating-free online exams made students protest against the decision to take in-person exams, despite the fact that all classes were held online. In the wake of the lack of foresight exercised by the government, the Federal Minister for Education, Shafqat Mahmood’s indecisive statement empowered universities to decide on behalf of the HEC for students to take exams. Their peaceful protest turned into ugly clashes with the university administration.

Some old-school academicians have been arguing that cheating online is pretty easy and nearly all exam questions could be answered using google. I am unsure as to what extent they are right, but a class of a hundred students cheating online for the exam could nearly produce the same answers that are easy to catch in the era of high-tech specialised software. Teachers believe that invigilating hundreds of students online might compromise the exam honour code.

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In comparison with overseas educational institutions, we are not even spending half of the money as they have on research and development to invent methods to elevate academic standards for dispensing quality education and maintaining honour codes. In Pakistan, with job security and other perks of being employed at public universities, the professors barely struggle to prepare themselves for learning techniques of remote education. Lack of effort to cover the syllabus, poor response to student questioning due to lack of training and the grim future of the average student was the agenda of the recent student protest.

By subscribing to automated proctoring services, we could minimise the chances of online exam cheating. These services are extensively used by the foreign universities, which are monitoring their students taking online exams at home. They use artificial intelligence that automatically blocks internet browsers from accessing exam material websites, keeps a check on students’ activity during the exam, verify student’s information and their geographical location and have the ability to detect suspicious movements of the test taker’s head and eyes. Some software also has the ability to detect bluetooth devices, and unusual eyeball movement of the student if they are looking at some material outside the screen.

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During my educational period in the United States, I had the privilege to closely monitor their prevention, and strategies to minimise the risk of cheating on exams. One of them, using an equitable, low-tech and affordable solution for preventing cheating is the open-book exam for everyone. This exam type not only helps in preventing a student to breach the honour code, but also stimulates the thinking process and problem-solving skills of the students, as they encounter hypothetical questions in the exam that replicates the real-life problem a student might face on the job.

The bottom line: Pakistan needs to overhaul its British-era inherited education system and should bring it in compliance with 21st century standards. It’s time that HEC and universities pay heed to providing quality online education, as well as inventing ways for preventing cheating.